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Laos: Although fighting has eased in recent days, Communist gains in the Bolovens Plateau area have stimulated a resurgence of southern separatist sentiment.

On 29 February the American ambassador was asked to come to an urgent meeting with Prince Boun Oum, Vice Prime Minister Leuam and Finance Minister Sisouk. All are prominent leaders of the southern rightist faction. They expressed alarm over the Communist threat in the south and misgivings over Vientiane's handling of the situation.

The leaders claim that current government policies have "worked against southern interests" and want to call on "outside help." They are looking to Thailand for military assistance and have suggested opening negotiations to get it.

The ambassador may have dissuaded them from making a unilateral approach to the Thais behind Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's back and has instead proposed shifting friendly guerrilla units from northern Laos.

This is the most explicit expression yet of the anxiety created by the government's recent military reversals in widespread areas of the country. Should the southerners seek Thai ground support, and should this be blocked by Souvanna in the face of continuing military reversals, a resurgence of southern separatist sentiment could confront the Vientiane government with a major problem.

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Communist China: Production is to be given priority over revolution in the countryside again this spring.

On 26 February, the Tsinghai Revolutionary Committee--doubtless transmitting orders from Peking--laid down regulations for spring farm work which call for "Mao study classes" to be small, short, and restricted to off-duty hours. The regulations say that intruders from the cities are to be kept to a minimum and to consist mainly of army propaganda teams rather than Red Guards with their penchant for contention and violence.

The 1967 harvest is estimated to have been exceptionally good. Boosted by favorable weather, it probably approached 200 million tons, about ten million tons more than in 1966. The increase in population during 1967, however, absorbed almost four million tons of the difference. Imports were reduced by about two million tons. Furthermore, peasants probably kept more food for themselves than usual.

The good 1967 harvest has eased food supply problems for 1968 but agricultural prospects remain precarious. A repetition of 1967's good weather is necessary to maintain last year's production level. Even if the new regulations for spring farm work are enforced successfully, the flow of industrial goods supporting agricultural work is likely to be reduced more than during 1967. In the rural areas themselves, there appears to be no way to regain the full services of professional cadres or restore discipline among peasants so long as the Cultural Revolution goes on. Local broadcasts last month indicated poor morale on the farms, with relations between the peasants and cadres worsening in some areas.

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Budapest Conference: The Soviets evidently are determined to press for a consensus on convening a world conference despite the offense this gives a number of parties.

The Rumanians, who walked out at Budapest, were angered at having been confronted once again with a fait accompli. Soviet delegation chief Suslov's speech and the well-rehearsed chorus endorsing Moscow's proposals for a formal world conference made a travesty of the meeting's "consultative" character. The direct cause of Bucharest's walk-out was, however, the rejection of its demand that the meeting censure the Syrian delegate for his attacks on Rumanian "nationalism" and "chauvinism."

The Rumanians probably expected Moscow to try to dominate the conference. They attended in order to set forth their views, expose the facade of "equality," and escape being labeled obstructionist.

These developments will sharpen differences within and among the parties in the bloc. They will give rise to uncertainties within the Eastern European parties as well as raise new expectations, and will intensify factional differences. Those who have been hoping to loosen the ideological bonds of the past two decades will find encouragement, while the dogmatists will see only the possibility of more fragmentation.

Moscow, assured of the support of an "overwhelming majority" at Budapest, was ready to press for a world conference knowing full well this would further alienate the Rumanians and others. Suslov called for the creation of a temporary commission to prepare for a world conference next November or December. This is the first time Moscow has publicly committed itself to a specific time schedule and procedure since Khrushchev's abortive campaign four years ago.

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[redacted] the USSR is trying "to save what can still be saved." In the end, however, Moscow is not likely to achieve through this or a subsequent conference any greater Communist unity under its leadership.

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*Panama: The political situation is tense as opposition elements move ahead with plans to impeach President Robles.

A communique by opposition presidential candidate Arnulfo Arias' National Union announcing his plans to support the Christian Democrats in trying Robles before the National Assembly was widely publicized in the Panamanian press yesterday. A special session of the assembly is expected to convene on the afternoon of 4 March to hear impeachment charges. Robles is to be accused of flagrant violation of the constitution because of his alleged interference in the electoral process.

Arias lieutenants have predicted that their party's control of the unicameral legislature will ensure the two-thirds vote necessary to obtain conviction. Arias and his political allies control 29 of the 42 deputies and need only 28 affirmative votes.

The first vice president, Arias supporter Max Del Valle, is returning from a trip abroad. He would assume the presidency at such a time as the legislature begins debate on the formal impeachment charges.

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Some compromise may yet be worked out. If Robles carries out his threat to dissolve the assembly, a clash between the National Guard and Arias' followers is probable. Should public order break down, extremists might try to take advantage of the violence to incite anti-US incidents along the Canal Zone boundary.

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Colombia-Venezuela: Communist leaders in the two countries, who are now focusing on peaceful means of gaining power, have reaffirmed that armed force may ultimately be necessary.

Colombian Communist Party Secretary General Vieira said in late February that the party would have to use both peaceful and violent means to come to power. Vieira said that conditions were not right at present for guerrilla warfare in Colombia and that the party should concentrate on peaceful activity, such as participation in elections. He believes that party guerrillas should confine their activities to self-defense for the present.

Vieira also contended that the establishment of a Soviet Embassy in Colombia will help the party's peaceful activities a great deal. He expects that more money will be available for labor and student activities and for the party's political campaigns and programs.

Splinter groups have split away from both Communist parties over the question of armed struggle, and some dissension continues within each party. Although both parties favor the peaceful way at this time, they are faced with the task of mollifying their more action-minded militants. In addition, the reaffirmation of ultimate dependence on armed struggle may be designed to regain the loyalty of party members who left the party over this issue and have joined active guerrilla movements.

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